

Colleges, Universities and Communities Advancing Social and Economic Justice

By James T. Harris III and Ira Harkavy

American society is in desperate need of a successful antipoverty strategy. Far too many Americans, particularly America's children, live in conditions of want and despair that are both unnecessary (given this nation's wealth) and shameful. We need to answer the questions, What should be done, and who should play a prominent role in developing and implementing the strategy? We contend that colleges and universities need to play a central role if we are significantly to reduce poverty in the United States and throughout the world.

Higher education is, in our judgment, the most influential institution in advanced societies. Its mission, societal role, and resources are particularly suited to helping America fulfill the democratic promise of America for all Americans. Although all too often colleges and universities have tried to distance themselves from the poverty in their own local environments, things are changing rapidly. Since the early 1990s, a movement dedicated to educating students for democratic citizenship and developing the knowledge necessary for creating and sustaining an optimally democratic society has developed. This movement is sometimes referred to as the engaged college and

university civic responsibility or the engaged university movement. Colleges and universities are becoming engaged civic institutions largely through efforts to improve their local environment and to reduce poverty and disadvantage in the communities of which they are a part. Service learning, volunteer projects, institutional investment and support are some of the means that have been used to create democratic, mutually beneficial, mutually respectful partnerships designed to make a profound difference in the community and on the campus.¹

In this brief essay we make the case for colleges and universities taking the lead in fostering economic and social justice. We will also highlight engaged, civic work at Defiance College and Widener University to illustrate what colleges and universities have done as well as what they need to do in the future.

Institutions of higher education in general, and research universities in particular, have become arguably the most influential institutions in the world. Derek Bok highlighted the research university's preeminent role in producing "new discoveries, highly trained personnel, and expert knowledge."² Echoing Daniel Bell and others, Bok described the modern

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¹ Ira Harkavy, *Foreword*, in *BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING* xi-xv (Barbara Jacoby ed., 2003).

² DEREK C. BOK, *UNIVERSITIES AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICA* 3 (1990).

university “as the central institution in post-educational society.”³ At the turn of the twentieth century, William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago (1892–1906), identified the urban “Great University” as the most strategic-organizational innovation of modern society. In particular, he emphasized the university’s central role in shaping the schooling system both because of its prestige and power (serving as a reference institution for schools from prekindergarten through grade 12) and its role in educating teachers. The role of colleges and universities in shaping the schooling system today is much greater than at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴

As “place-based” institutions (moving for them is difficult) with enormous and varied resources (human, economic, political), higher educational institutions can be particularly valuable partners in local coalitions to improve the quality of community life. But for colleges and universities to fulfill their democratic potential, they will have to make the mission of helping create a democratic society their primary mission. Service and education to create a better society were central aims of the colonial college. Democratization served as the central mission of the American research university, including both land grant institutions and urban research universities, such as Johns Hopkins, Chicago, Columbia, and Pennsylvania.⁵ In his study of college and uni-

versity mission statements, Alexander Astin found “serving society and promoting and strengthening our particular form of democratic self-government” as the stated purpose of U.S. colleges and universities.⁶

Needless to say, higher education is a long way from realizing its democratic mission. Ancient, elitist habits and customs dating from Plato’s Academy and the ongoing pressures of commercialization and commodification are among the obstacles to colleges and universities doing what they should and could do to help reduce poverty and help create a truly good, democratic society.⁷ Both of us have worked for colleges and universities that have made progress toward becoming engaged civic institutions that contribute to the quality of life in their community. Ira Harkavy works for the University of Pennsylvania, an institution widely recognized as a leader in the engaged university movement.⁸ James T. Harris III served as president of Defiance College and currently serves as president of Widener University. Brief case studies of Defiance and Widener follow to illustrate what two very different kinds of institutions can do.

Defiance College

Defiance College is located in a remote, rural area of northwest Ohio within a county with a total population of under 50,000. The city where the college is located has a population of approximately

³ *Id.* at 3.

⁴ The quotations are from William Rainey Harper’s 1899 charter day address at the University of California, *The University and Democracy*, in WILLIAM RAINEY HARPER, *THE TREND IN HIGHER EDUCATION* 25 (1905).

⁵ Ira Harkavy, *Honoring Community, Honoring Place*, *CAMPUS COMPACT READER* 4 (Fall 2002).

⁶ Alexander W. Astin, *Liberal Education and Democracy: The Case for Pragmatism*, in *EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY: RE-IMAGINING LIBERAL LEARNING IN AMERICA* 211 (Robert Orrill ed., 1997).

⁷ Harkavy, *supra* note 5, at 1–9; Lee Benson & Ira Harkavy *Saving the Soul of the University: What Is to Be Done?*, in *THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY? INFORMATION, MARKETS, AND MANAGEMENT* 169–209 (Kevin Robins & Frank Webster eds., 2002).

⁸ In 2002 the University of Pennsylvania was named number one in the country in service learning (with Berea College and Stanford University) in *U.S. News and World Report’s* 2003 issue on “America’s Best Colleges.” The University-Assisted Community School Program, a collaboration of Penn’s Center for Community Partnerships, the West Philadelphia Partnership, and the Philadelphia School District’s West Region, was awarded the inaugural W.T. Grant Foundation Youth Development Prize by a panel of the National Academy of Sciences.

17,000 citizens and is the location of the largest General Motors foundry in the world. During the late 1980s and early 1990s GM started closing foundries around the country and transferring workers to Defiance. As the racial and ethnic mix in the county began to change and the city population began to grow, many societal problems were blamed on the changes in the racial and ethnic demographics rather than on the inadequate social service networks or lack of public advocacy groups in the region.

Over the years, the community became more racially diverse, so much so that by 1994 the African American and Hispanic populations in Defiance County had grown to almost 20 percent of the total population. Over the ten years that this transformation took place, the city took no action to increase racial and ethnic diversity among critical public service professions. For example, there were no minority teachers in the public schools, no minority police or fire officers, and all but one elected official throughout the entire county was Caucasian. These discrepancies led to much strife in the community. For example, the situation was ripe for extremist groups including the KKK, which actively recruited in the county and even held a large public rally in the public square. The issues were not restricted to race and demographic changes. At one point in the mid-1990s, the county had a higher percentage teenage pregnancy rate than the three largest cities in Ohio. Likewise, there was a growing homelessness problem, and the issues of the rural poor were not being very well met.

The county had one institution of higher learning, Defiance College. Founded in 1850, the college had its own set of problems as it had experienced a serious decline in enrollment over the past decade and was facing serious financial difficulties. Unlike other institutions which had larger endowments and embraced a more proactive role in the communities they served, Defiance College had an endowment of under \$5 million and no real history of engaging the community. However, in 1994 when a new president was named, the college began planning to correct its situation. The College decided,

as part of planning, to consider the college's appropriate role in the community. After almost a year the college developed a new curriculum that focused on the use of service learning and formally adopted the idea that the primary role of the College was to produce students prepared for "lives of responsible citizenship."

Since the college did not have the deep pockets to assist the community directly, the college decided to become the convener of various social service agencies, government entities, and the public school district for the purpose of addressing the issues facing the community. Some results of that good work included the creation of a general education curriculum that implemented service-learning requirements for every major on campus. What this practically meant is that all of its 1,000 students would be required to spend significant time in community service during their four years on campus.

To help address the increasing need for volunteers and outreach programs to the county, the college developed a partnership with a local bank, the United Way, and the Points of Light Foundation to create a countywide volunteer action center. This center became the clearinghouse for volunteer services in the county and provided low-cost office space for agencies that could not afford space of their own. Organizations such as the local NAACP chapter and an organization focused on advocating the rights of the disabled were now able to have offices in town. While the College did have to invest some of its limited resources in the center, it primarily acted as the catalyst for fund-raising for the project and actually provided free space on campus in an old building until a better location downtown could be identified.

The college also partnered with the local public schools and created after-school programs for first to fourth graders on its campus and at four locations throughout the city. A new summer pre-college program for Hispanic and African American students in the county was established, and funds were raised for scholarships to students who completed the program. College students organized

voter registration drives both on campus and off and encouraged voters to pass a much-needed public school levy. By 1998 over 67 percent of all freshmen at Defiance College had signed up to mentor or tutor in the public school system. The college also partnered with the local police department and public schools to recruit and provide scholarships to entering students of color who might pursue majors in education or criminal justice and be willing to remain in the county upon graduation.

In 1995 the college was one of the first in the country to introduce a comprehensive financial aid program geared to attracting and rewarding students who demonstrated a commitment to community service in high school by redefining "merit" to include civic engagement activities. Students who received this scholarship had to commit to giving over 150 hours of community service a year. A group of these students adopted a local homeless shelter and helped advocate additional funding and developed an awareness campaign throughout the county regarding the needs of the rural poor. After a few years the college rebounded and began attracting much national attention. Enrollment grew over 35 percent, the endowment more than doubled, and because of its advocacy work in the community an alumnus gave the college \$6 million to create a school for the advancement of humanity focusing on promoting undergraduate research on issues concerning the improvement of the human condition.

Two important lessons can be learned from the Defiance College experience. First, an institution of higher learning can be the catalyst for social change in a distressed community even if it does not possess a large endowment or have a national reputation. Second, strategic academically based community engagement, integrating research, teaching, and service, can make a fundamental difference in the lives of the people and communities that the institution serves.

Widener University

Around the country we are seeing more colleges and universities reviewing their basic missions and focusing their consid-

erable intellectual and human resources on solving the issues of the communities that they serve. One example of a university that is rethinking its identity and role in society is Widener University located in Chester, Pennsylvania. Widener is a doctorate-granting institution founded in 1821. With an operating budget in excess of \$100 million and close to 5,000 students on its Chester campus, its relationship with the Chester community has been strained at best. The community views Widener as being in the community, but the prevailing opinion is that the university is not "of" the community. Apparently in the past the university attempted to create its own zip code and mailing address so as to disassociate itself from Chester, even going so far as calling itself a school located in the greater Philadelphia suburbs. The campus is built with many fences surrounding it, and the culture has been to ingrain in the students, faculty, and staff that once you leave the campus you should not feel safe and the community is not a welcoming place.

Widener is indeed located in an interesting place. A place located precisely in the middle of one of America's greatest challenges, the schism between the haves and the have-nots. If you travel two miles south of where the campus is located, you find a community with a proud past where William Penn landed and Martin Luther King studied. It is a community, however, that in the last census had one out of four citizens living below the poverty line; where the median family income is half that of the rest of the county; and a community where the school district was placed under the authority of the state. If, on the other hand, you travel two miles north of where we are located, you find another community that, in the last census, found seven out of ten adults with a college degree; a community with one of the largest concentrations of wealth in the country; and a community with one of the best school districts in the state.

The fundamental question that Widener must ask itself is, What is its primary mission? Should not its focus be on preparing students as citizens in a twenty-first century democracy by modeling good citizenship as an institution and

measuring its success by how well it is contributing to the physical, social, and civic well-being of the people in the communities that it serves? Widener must view those communities as places where its students can have the most powerful learning experiences, where its resources can make the biggest difference, and where its finest hour is when its objectives and the objectives of the community are one and the same. The university has begun strategic planning to rethink its mission and to create a compelling vision for the future. To date over 200 faculty, students, staff, alumni, trustees, and community leaders are engaged in this dialog, and the president has been a leading advocate for increasing the university's commitment to civic engagement. This is very similar to the idea of engaged college and university civil responsibility, discussed earlier.

A possible first step would be to partner with the K-12 schools in Chester. Widener must learn what the schools need and determine what it can bring to the table because, if it can have an impact in that arena, the ripple effect will be felt for years. Throughout the country, there are numerous partnerships between schools and institutions of higher education, and Widener should utilize the experience of others when working with the Chester-Upland school district and the Edison Schools. However, the university must work closely with the leadership of the school district to make sure that whatever it does do, fits the specific needs of Chester. Over the past year, the university and the school district have been meeting to discuss ways to partner and to raise funds for special joint projects, with some encouraging results so far. The number of university students volunteering in the local school district has quadrupled in the past nine months and several Widener faculty members have developed relationships with the school district across a wide range of disciplines. These partnerships range from Widener political sci-

ence students hosting mock immigration hearings on campus for fourth graders to a law professor teaching a course to high school students. There have also been preliminary discussions with the university to see if it would be interested in assisting in the day-to-day operations of an experimental school.

The university has partnered with the local hospital to create a university technology park that has been successful in attracting new businesses to the area as well as securing a federal grant for workforce training for high school dropouts. It has also reached out to the neighborhoods adjacent to the campus and created community-university committees to discuss issues of common concern. But these are all just the first steps toward true civic engagement. In the next two years the university hopes to enact curricular reforms to ensure that all students have community-based learning opportunities before they graduate and that the faculty members who lead such efforts are rewarded accordingly with additional support, grants, promotion, and tenure. This type of momentous change will take time, but, if done well, Widener University can become a leading metropolitan university and be among the truly engaged and connected institutions in America.

These all too brief case studies are designed to highlight how higher educational institutions can help reduce poverty and advance economic and social well-being in their local communities. Fundamental change obviously requires more than isolated efforts of isolated higher educational institutions and their school and community partners. The strategy we propose adapts a page from the environmentalists: think and network nationally and globally, act locally. We believe that general strategy holds promise for creating a genuine national (indeed global) movement of truly engaged universities and communities dedicated to helping create a much more democratic America and world.